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ABSTRACT

The paper describes methods of natural language enhancement which both teachers and parents can use with young children who have language delays. The importance of connecting language to meaningful, functional communication is stressed. The reinforcement for the child becomes the adult's natural and spontaneous response. Adults, then, must prove to children that words work. Expansion, one method of language enhancement, builds the child's immature responses into more mature syntax. Parallel talk is another technique, in which adults supply children with short phrases describing their actions. Parents and teachers use self-talk when they describe their own thoughts and actions in short phrases and sentences, thus modeling language. A fourth language stimulaton method is providing as many experiences as possible with concrete objects in relation to natural, meaningful situations at school or in the home. (CL)

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CLASSROOM CLASSICS
NATURAL LANGUAGE STIMULATION FOR LANGUAGE DELAYED CHILDREN

Barbara Lowenthal

Child: "Cookie"
Teacher or Parent: "Cookie? I want cookie.
Well, here it is!"

The above conversation is an example of a natural language stimulation technique called expansion. This article will describe this technique and other methods of natural language enhancement which are employed by both teachers and parents in our early childhood special education classes to assist students who have language delays. Children eventually acquire words because they bring results. People *do* things when words are spoken and that is really why language is meaningful and functional to the young child. Some theorists (Engelmann and Bruner 1969, Becker, Engelman and Thomay 1971) have advocated actually "paying" the child for his language, but we feel the best payoff is the adult's natural and spontaneous response. If your student says "cookie" and receives a cookie, he has learned that language works. It's like magic!

Our task, then, as teachers or parents, is to prove that words work; and this can be a most rewarding effort. At this point, we are not seeking absolute clarity of speech. The essential guideline is to accept and reinforce words which are close to the targets. If the child says "sue" for shoe or "ba" for ball, we immediately let him know that we understood. A good teacher or parent response in such cases would be: "Yes, that's a shoe, shoe." In this response, the adult has accomplished two goals: he/she has demonstrated to the child that he has spoken a word (reinforcement) and the student has been given a proper model of how the word is said. To say, "no, say *shoe*," may punish the word attempt and slow down the vocabulary development process.

In using this technique of expansion, which is really a process of building the child's immature responses into more mature syntax, the teacher or parent needs to remember to expand the child's statements into phrases or sentences just slightly more complex than his attempt. In this way, the youngster is given a target which he can comprehend and imitate. For example, when the child says "Billy up" and the teacher tells him to respond, "Please, Billy wants to get up," she has expanded a simple request. However, it may have been expanded to such a complex statement that the ultimate goal is simply too difficult for the student to incorporate. A better way of expansion then would be to say: "Billy wants up," or "Please pick Billy up."

An additional word of caution that we, as adult facilitators, find useful to remember is not to expect the child to follow our expanded statements with the correct or expanded phrases. He will do this when his language-learning capabilities develop. Our goal is more gradual progress than immediate change. Expansion is a technique which can be done continuously during the day as it really calls for very little effort on the part of the adult. Some other examples may help:

Child: "Kitty up"
Teacher/Parent: "The kitty gets up."

Child: "He a cat too?
Teacher/Parent: "Is he a cat too? Yes, he is a cat."

Sometimes the most difficulty comes in self-reference statements which are plentiful in a child's speech. An example is the following:

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Child: "Me want outside."
Teacher/Parent: "I want to go outside."
Child: "Me want outside too!"

The idea, of course, is to keep trying and eventually the student will learn the proper use of the pronouns "I" and "me".

A second technique which we use for language stimulation is parallel talk. Language develops first in the silent thought of a child's mind before he can verbally express it. For this reason, we try to help the process along by supplying language stimulation even when no speech is heard. Here we have to combine some guesswork with tact to carry out this technique effectively. As the child plays nearby, we supply him with short phrases describing his actions. For example, if the child is banging a block on the floor, we might say,

"There's the block. If I hit the block on the floor, it makes a noise. A big noise. Bang, bang, bang. Block. My block. Bang the block."

In this technique, we are naming objects to expand vocabulary but, just as essential, syntax is being modeled to describe the student's inner language or thoughts. If we are able to guess correctly and parallel the child's actions and thinking, we hopefully are placing words and sentences in his mind for future reference.

A third natural language technique, which we find is advantageous, can be termed self-talk. You may have heard that it isn't dangerous to talk to yourself but watch out if you start to answer! We try not to pay attention to this warning when we stimulate language in children. Often, during the day, teachers and parents are engaged in activities which do not directly involve their children. However, the youngsters may be playing or working close by. It is tempting, at these intervals, to capitalize on the opportunities to complete some of our own tasks since the children do not require immediate attention. However, these times are excellent for meaningful language stimulation. What we attempt to do is to keep a conversation going, using simple phrases and sentences to describe our own thoughts and actions. For example, if a teacher is cutting paper, she might say:

"I have to cut the paper. Cut the paper. I need scissors. My scissors. Open, shut the scissors. Open, shut. I can cut, cut, cut."

This technique of self-talk also gives a child an opportunity to hear more mature phrases, sentences and vocabulary. It is important, however, to remember some simple rules when employing this method: we speak in simple, short phrases, describe our actions and thoughts and do not expect the students to respond directly.

A fourth language stimulation technique is to keep in mind that there are some critical elements in vocabulary learning. One element is the following: a child does not learn a word as a meaningful sound until he has experienced it in a variety of ways. For example, how many ways can a person "sense" an apple? He can see, touch, smell, taste and hear it (if it is crisp). All these perceptions are necessary, especially for the language-delayed student, before a word like "apple" can be learned. Picture books can be recommended for language assistance, but we feel that real objects are far better. It is essential for the child to have as many experiences with the objects as possible before he learns their names. In addition, the word to be learned must be presented when the object, person or experience is present. We need especially to make clear to the youngster the association between the sound and its referent.

Another critical element in vocabulary learning is that repetition is essential. Some children need ten repetitions of a word before attempting to say it, while others may need one hundred. A skilled teacher or parent can find many different ways to say a target word such as "shirt" while dressing the child. For example:

"Which shirt
How about t
Yellow shirt.
I like this shi
Hands in the
Head in the s
The shirt is o

Word use w
relation to nat
tions at school
learning takes
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the child need
When a child
favorite truck
motivated to
another time.
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beneficial; if
favorite doll
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more natural
child decides a
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"Which shirt do you want to wear?
How about this shirt? Shirt
Yellow shirt.
I like this shirt too.
Hands in the shirt.
Head in the shirt.
The shirt is on."

Word use will develop, we find, in relation to natural, meaningful situations at school or in the home; the best learning takes place when all possible circumstances are used. These circumstances include instances in which the child needs or wants something. When a child wants to play with his favorite truck, he may be more motivated to say "truck" than at another time. Also circumstances in which the object is visible are beneficial; if the student sees her favorite doll, she will be more motivated to say the word. Vocabulary and conversation can be developed in a more natural way, in addition, if the child decides and makes his own choice of a game rather than the teacher or parent choosing the type of activity or play. When the student can make the decision, motivation is more ensured.

All of these techniques, which have been described as natural language methods, seem to be beneficial as well as enjoyable ways to stimulate inner, receptive and expressive language in our special education class.

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